



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

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INTERIOR DEPARTMENT REITERATES OPPOSITION TO TRANSFER OF WICHITA MOUNTAINS WILDLIFE REFUGE ACREAGE TO ARMY

In a report submitted this week to a House Committee, the Department of the Interior reiterates its opposition to a proposed transfer of 10,700 acres of the Wichita Mountains National Wildlife Refuge in Oklahoma to the Department of the Army, Assistant Secretary Wesley A. D'Ewart said today.

"This proposal to cut away a huge area of the National Wildlife Refuge, in our opinion, is unnecessary, unwarranted, and not in the best public interest," Mr. D'Ewart wrote the House Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries in the Department's report on a bill (H.R. 9665) calling for the transfer. The Bureau of the Budget earlier had advised the Department that it had no objection to submission of the report to the Committee.

The Interior Department fully recognizes the importance of providing adequately for military training necessary to our Nation's defense, Mr. D'Ewart said, and added that many instances of cooperative effort between the Interior Department and the military establishment have proved mutually beneficial.

Describing the Wichita Mountains Refuge as a "truly magnificent area of great importance and value to the Nation," the report, signed by Assistant Secretary D'Ewart, defended the wildlife and recreational values of the area and contended that removal of the portion sought by the Army "would be a mortal blow to the refuge."

"Six of the largest and finest recreational lakes lie within that part of the refuge that would be removed under the provisions of the pending bill, and two campgrounds also are located within this portion of the refuge," the report explains.

"To this Department," the report continues, "this proposed reduction of the refuge seems a wasteful and unnecessary procedure, inasmuch as the very area requested by the Army, and in fact more land, totaling 35,000 acres, has been under permit from this Department to the Army since 1941 for maneuvering and firing positions."

Concluding its report, the Department of the Interior emphasized the importance of giving proper consideration to nonmilitary values and needs of the Nation.

"Without minimizing the importance of our military training activities, and without reflection upon the Department of the Army in carrying out its important functions, it seems apparent that a military request or proposal, such as the current proposals, should not automatically be considered to override or to be paramount to nonmilitary values and needs of the Nation, unless such a request cannot be met in a less harmful manner or unless the military need is paramount to nonmilitary considerations," the report declares. "Our military activities are designed, of course, to protect and preserve the Nation and its important assets. Certainly, by the same token, those same assets should not be destroyed or diminished if it can be avoided. We believe the present proposal is a case in point; military considerations should be evaluated in their true perspective along with nonmilitary considerations relating to public use and the national importance of the National Wildlife Refuge."

The Department of the Interior has opposed the transfer proposal consistently since it was first suggested, Assistant Secretary D'Ewart noted in announcing transmission of the present report. Department officials repeatedly have voiced their opposition and have defended the integrity of the Oklahoma area, he added.

A series of conferences between officials of the Departments of the Interior and Army last summer and fall failed to produce agreement, although the Interior officials advanced an alternative proposal under which the Army's temporary use permit would be continued. The Interior Department has suggested that firing sites be established within the refuge to fire toward impact areas within the present Fort Sill, outside the refuge boundaries. The Department has offered to assist the

Army in establishing a buffer zone which would be closed to the public during firing periods but available to public use during times when firing was not under way. The Army has proposed to fire from Fort Sill into impact areas within the present refuge. As with the use permit presently in effect, the Interior Department's alternative proposal would provide for defense training needs and at the same time protect and preserve the wildlife and recreational values of the refuge, Mr. D'Ewart emphasized.

In its report, the Interior Department has again outlined the alternative proposal and has renewed the suggestion that the two Departments work cooperatively to solve the problem.

The text of the Department of the Interior report follows:

"My dear Mr. Bonner:

"Your Committee has requested a report on H. R. 9665, a bill 'To provide for the transfer of a certain tract of land, being a portion of the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, to the Secretary of the Army for use as a part of the Fort Sill Military Reservation, Fort Sill, Oklahoma.' This bill would transfer 10,700 acres of land from the National Wildlife Refuge to the Fort Sill Military Reservation.

"This proposal to cut away a huge area of the National Wildlife Refuge, in our opinion, is unnecessary, unwarranted, and not in the best public interest. We recommend, accordingly, that H. R. 9665 be not enacted.

"This proposed reduction of the Refuge has been advanced heretofore, but was withdrawn following some consideration and many objections by persons and organizations interested in preserving the Refuge. Visitors to this area approximate a million persons annually, and the number is increasing. As hereafter indicated, this is only one indication of the value and public benefit of the Refuge. With due regard to the importance of our military preparedness program, which we fully recognize, we believe that, from an objective standpoint, after considering the essential facts of the matter, the proposal involved in this bill cannot be justified.

"As a primary consideration, it should be noted that the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge is a truly magnificent area of great importance and value to the Nation. Other considerations must be carefully weighed in the light of this significant fact. This area is one of the Nation's prize exhibits in its great system of wildlife refuges and it is, of course, Oklahoma's last great primitive area, as well as its greatest recreational area. In addition to its use as a national wildlife refuge, this area provides a wealth of recreational, educational, and inspirational benefit to a large segment of our population. These benefits are essential to the health and well-being of our people. They cannot be computed in dollars and cents, but are tremendous nonetheless, and may be expected to increase as time goes on.

"The Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge permits outdoor experiences to thousands of people on a given day as well as large-scale encampments of youth groups, such as the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, 4-H Clubs, religious groups, lodges, etc. Twelve hundred fishermen a week dangle their lures in the twenty lakes of the area. The annual Easter Pageant is held here, with attendance as high as 70,000 persons at times. Six of the largest and finest recreational lakes lie within that part of the Refuge that would be removed under the provisions of the pending bill and two important campgrounds also are located within this portion of the refuge.

"Large preservation herds of the Great Plains former abundant and varied big game fauna exist within this Wildlife Refuge. Here, under natural conditions, roams one of America's finest buffalo herds. Preservation herds of elk and antelope are maintained, and the world's largest and probably only true long-horned cattle herd of over 300 animals is maintained. White-tailed deer and pure-blooded wild turkeys roam the area. Plants and animals found nowhere else in Oklahoma occur in this isolated mountain area.

"The Army's proposal to take over 10,700 acres of the Wildlife Refuge will reduce the public recreational area of the Refuge by one-half and will include, as we have stated, six of the largest recreational lakes, most the remaining lakes being in the big-game area and too isolated and small for much public use. The mountain area in the proposed Army withdrawal includes the life-producing watershed of the Refuge from which comes the runoff to maintain the recreational lakes and the rich pastures for the big-game herds. This is a very important feature of the Refuge. Removal of this area would be a mortal blow to the Refuge. In this connection, it should be noted that there has always been a tremendous fire hazard at the Refuge. It is certain that the fires which will result from the firing of heavy guns, and especially rockets, in this rough area would sweep out of the mountains into the heavily wooded and grassed recreational and big-game areas, resulting in their destruction.

"To this Department this proposed reduction of the Refuge seems a wasteful and unnecessary procedure, inasmuch as the very area requested by the Army, and in fact more land, totaling 35,000 acres, has been under permit from this Department to the Army since 1941 for maneuvering and firing positions. Therefore, we have countered the Army proposal with the suggestion that the existing permit continue in force. During firing periods, a substantial area of the Refuge would be set aside as a safety or buffer zone to the more dangerous impact area on Fort Sill proper. On weekends and other periods when the Army was not firing, this acreage would be open to public use. The annually increased recreational use of the Refuge makes every day that the entire Refuge is available for this purpose extremely important. In the circumstances, we feel that the proposed reduction of the Refuge would be wasteful and unnecessary.

"We are prepared to work cooperatively with the Army authorities in solving Fort Sill's firing problem by mutual conference and agreement. If it could be shown that a vital portion of this Refuge area is absolutely essential to exclusive military use, that no other less important or less significant area elsewhere

could be used for that purpose, or that no inter-departmental procedure could be devised for military activities on a portion of the Refuge (as has been done in the past with concurrent protection of wildlife values and public use of the area), the question presented by this bill would be very difficult. Fortunately, however, this is not the case. We have reason to believe that other suitable areas are available. Also, we are convinced, blanket transfer of the area in question is unnecessary for the reasons that we have cited. In view of our offer to cooperate further with the Department of the Army, we ask in return that the Army recognize the value to the Nation of the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge for the purposes that we have cited, and that it cooperate with us to an equal degree in resolving the problem of land use in that region.

"Without minimizing the importance of our military training activities, and without reflection upon the Department of the Army in carrying out its important functions, it seems apparent that a military request or proposal, such as the current proposals, should not automatically be considered to override or to be paramount to nonmilitary values and needs of the Nation, unless such request cannot be met in a less harmful manner or unless the military need is paramount to non-military considerations. Our military activities are designed, of course, to protect and to preserve the Nation and its important assets. Certainly, by the same token, those same assets should not be destroyed or diminished if it can be avoided. We believe the present proposal is a case in point; military considerations should be evaluated in their true perspective along with nonmilitary considerations relating to public use and the national importance of the National Wildlife Refuge.

"The Bureau of the Budget has advised that there is no objection to the submission of this report to your Committee."

Sincerely yours,

(Sgd) Wesley A. D'Ewart
Assistant Secretary of the Interior

Hon. Herbert C. Bonner
Chairman, Committee on
Merchant Marine and Fisheries
House of Representatives
Washington 25, D. C.

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